



Service Center NEWS

If it matters to you, it matters to us!

U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Food and Agriculture Council

September/October 1999

USDA Highlights Service Centers at Excellence in Government '99 Conference

USDA highlighted the Service Center effort at the Excellence in Government '99 Conference held July 12-15 at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington D.C. The conference brought together federal agencies, and private corporations supporting the federal government, for four days of workshops, panel discussions, presentations and information sharing.

The conference focused on efforts supporting the National Partnership for Reinventing Government. Conference attendees, panel members, presenters, and numerous conference volunteers represented the department at the conference. In addition, USDA provided several displays for the convention's Resource Exposition, which showcased federal agency and corporate capabilities to deliver the right solutions for 21st century government.

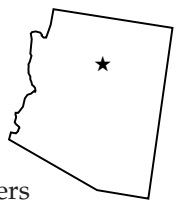
USDA's Service Center Initiative display highlighted the department's major reengineering efforts in customer service and assistance. The Service Center display booth, manned by Service Center Team staff, depicted the new capabilities provided to

(See Conference, continued on page 4)



The USDA Service Center booth at the Excellence in Government '99 Conference highlighting major reengineering efforts in customer service and assistance. Photos on the right of the display compared "old" business methods to "new" business methods made possible by using a common computer system in the Service Centers.

The Door is Always Open at USDA Service Center in Flagstaff, Arizona



When a customer drives an hour over unpaved roads to do business with USDA and arrives to find the office closed and a sign on the door that announces "Out in the field. Will return tomorrow," the reaction is less than positive.

At the Flagstaff, Arizona USDA Service Center, the door is always open.

The Flagstaff Service Center houses the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, Rural Development, and a Resource Conservation and Development office. The individual offices are open to a common main reception area.

"The fact that customers always get to see a real person, even if it's not someone from the agency they came to see, is a real plus," said NRCS Soil Scientist Al DeWalt. "The best part of sharing space is the 'no locked door' effect."

(See Arizona, continued on page 4)

Employee Groups Combine Efforts

The Service Center Implementation Team (SCIT) knew that in order to have a true team effort in the USDA Service Center, it was necessary to get all employee organizations together to address common issues and find common solutions. "If you really want to shock people, just tell them that the USDA field office unions and employee associations are working together," said Greg Carnill, Executive Officer of the National Food and Agriculture Council. "Not long ago you would have thought that they were throwing rocks at each other; and they were."

This past January, the Association Coordination Council (ACC) was formed with the assistance of the Union Coordination Council (UCC) and the SCIT. The ACC consists of representatives from every employee organization at the USDA Service Center level. Currently, there are 12 member groups. The Union Coordination Council is the representative group of the field office unions. There are 15 field office union that comprise the UCC and the group has been working together for approximately 5 years.

Since January of 1999, members of both groups have worked together to suggest improvements to USDA Service Center operations and increase cooperation between the Service Center Agencies. Since this alliance was formed, the ACC and UCC have developed position papers on reorganization and Service Center Optimization.

"This effort brings employee organizations across the three partner agencies together to address shared problems and concerns," Carnill said. "This approach to work on these issues represents field-level action to facilitate teamwork at the Service Center level."

In March of this year, a representative group of UCC and ACC members met at the USDA Beltsville, Maryland facility to write and present a position paper on five topics determined to be most important to Service Center employees. The paper addressed the budget for programs and salaries and



Deputy Secretary Richard Rominger (seated, right) is briefed by members of the Union Coordination Council and the Association Coordination Council on the combined group's proposal to maximize service center reinvention efforts.

expenses, outreach to non-traditional customers, defining the USDA workload and mission, addressing customer service issues, and establishing new business practices at the USDA Service Centers. The paper was presented to Deputy Secretary Richard Rominger.

In April of 1999, several members meet again to further refine the paper and present it to a joint USDA/Office of Management and Budget Task Force that was looking at the Service Center effort. OMB and Departmental officials expressed support for the joint efforts of the UCC and ACC, and are considering many of the suggestions in the paper could be implemented. The foundation of the work is based on continued joint efforts by the UCC and ACC working together to improve USDA customer service.

Based on the positive feedback and support from Departmental Officials and others, the UCC/ACC held a joint meeting the week of July 19, 1999. At the meeting, the full membership of both groups began to formulate a group policy and position for expanding the role of employees at the USDA Service Centers.

The UCC had previously written a paper for Secretary Glickman on Service Center optimization. The focus of the UCC effort was to create new business opportunities at the Service Centers. At the joint meeting in July, the ACC/UCC group recognized that in order to better expand the business opportunities at the USDA Service Centers, the optimization plan should be broken into three segments-improving traditional services, expanding the number of USDA services, and increasing the number of Federal services available at the Service Centers.

"With approximately 2500 locations across the United States, USDA is the only federal Department with a strong local presence in most rural communities. This local presence can provide an expanded opportunity to deliver much needed Federal Services in rural communities with greater convenience and access for more rural Americans," Carnill said. "The updated optimization paper was presented to Deputy Secretary Rominger and other Departmental officials with positive results. The paper could result

(See Efforts, continued on page 4)

Business Process Reengineering

Business Process Reengineering (BPR) is an effort designed to eventually improve the way we do business in USDA Service Centers across the country. The goal is to improve customer service and increase customer satisfaction. BPR works to streamline and standardize the way the three county-based agencies (RD, NRCS, FSA) perform similar tasks, using a common computer system. The results of BPR will help employees work more efficiently, do more with less, and avoid the duplication that USDA customers face.

The Service Center agencies began BPR because Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, Secretary Glickman, and agency leadership require that USDAs high levels of customer service be maintained and improved as the agencies streamline. These requirements are contained in the Government Performance and Results Act, the Vice President's National Performance Review, and the Service Center Strategic Plan. The focus of the requirements are improving customer service, encouraging cross-agency support, and making the

best use of limited resources. In addition, the needs of USDA customers are changing, demands are increasing, staff has been reduced, and technology is improving.

Business process reengineering is a critical link to making changes and improvements because technology changes can be extremely expensive. Automating old processes can be just as costly as automating new, combined processes. There are currently 24 business process reengineering projects.

Service Center Business Process Reengineering Projects

1. Customer Service Toolkit - focuses on Geographic Information System and related tools to improve conservation planning.
2. Wetlands and Easements - focuses on improving the delineation and management of USDA certified wetlands and easements.
3. Conservation Area Resource Assessment and Analysis - focuses on improved processes and tools, primarily Geographic Information System, for wide area resource analysis and assessment.
4. Combined Administrative Management - focuses on providing automated tools and new processes for human resource management.
5. Electronic Access to Information - focuses on providing the infrastructure that will enable the Service Center agencies to migrate appropriate business processes and information to the World Wide Web.
6. Directives - which provides centralized access to agency directives.
7. Service Center Organizer - which provides a common user interface and document management system.
8. Customer Information Management - focuses on providing a common source of customer information including name, address and phone number.
9. Integrated Office Information System - which provides 70 plus templates for letters and forms in Microsoft Office software, primarily Word and Excel.
10. Common Land Unit - which has two parts, one dealing with digitizing the farm tract and field boundaries on the 660 scale photo's in the service center and the second dealing with the management and maintenance of records related to the field boundaries.
11. Multi-family Housing - which will replace a legacy system currently on Service Center Business Process Reengineering computers. This application enables the management of multi-family housing projects.
12. Lending - which will provide integrated processes and tools for Service Center agency loan making.
13. Outreach - which will provide common processes and tools for reaching undeserved customers
14. Demographic and Business Area Analysis - focuses on providing U.S. and Agriculture Census and related data and World Wide Web query capabilities that allow the analysis of the customer base.
15. Disaster - which will provide improved processes for disaster programs.
16. Conservation Reserve Program - focuses on improving the processes and delivering new Geographic Information System tools for Conservation Reserve Program eligibility determinations.
17. Tobacco - focuses on improving the process associated with the sale of tobacco in warehouses.
18. Land Use - which will provide a common process for collecting and managing land use and related information.
19. Appeals - which will provide the ability to track appeals and provide linkages to related Service Center applications.
20. Risk and Productivity Assessment - focuses on automating the creation and delivery of crop insurance, actuarial maps, developing new insurance products and monitoring for risk assessment and compliance.
21. Data Acquisition, Integration and Delivery - which will provide common processes for delivering pre-formatted Geographic Information System data to the Service Centers and a national strategy for implementation, including priority counties.
22. Geographic Information System Training - which provides a Service Center customized Geographic Information System training course and a national strategy for implementing that training.
23. Office Information Profile - which provides a nationwide database of office locations and related information.
24. Paper Work Reduction - focuses on elimination of paper work required of customers by creating World Wide Web fillable forms and other related activities. The goal is to collect customer information once and reuse it.

Conference continued from page 1

Service Center staff at the nine field Business Process Reengineering pilot sites. Digital pictures compared "old" business methods to "new" methods enabled by a Common Computing Environment. Prototype support tools were also demonstrated.

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service participated in the Resource Exposition, showing several informative displays of Hammer Award winning initiatives. The U.S. Forest Service also participated, showing displays of current reinvention initiatives.

Arizona continued from page 1



Staff at the USDA Service Center in Flagstaff, Arizona, find working together and sharing resources has definite advantages.

Holidays, birthdays, and special occasions offer Service Center employees an opportunity to get together and get to know each other. "It gives us a chance to talk to staff from the other agencies," said Rose Gene, FSA Program Technician. "That makes it easier to approach them when needed."

Housing the four offices in the same location "took some getting used to," said Ruby Harding, RD Native American Outreach Specialist, who found the Service Center concept to be "busy." Sharing the fax machine, copier, and supplies, however, made

Efforts continued from page 2

in a Reinvention Laboratory if agreed to by the Vice President's National Partnership for Reinventing Government."

The core belief and goal of UCC/ACC coalition is to encourage that Service Center employees work together regardless of agency affiliation to provide outstanding customer service to our constituents. It is the intention of the group to show how USDA field employees work together for the common good, and provide a positive example for other USDA employees to copy.

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Comments or suggestions?

Have a newsletter article for submission?

Is there something your USDA Service Center does particularly well?

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things easier, and "I recently got help from NRCS on a computer set-up," Harding said. "That was really nice."

The idea that employees from all the agencies take turns covering for each other is liked by the staff. "There is access to the building and information during all business hours. That's a real plus for us. Rural Development only has two employees in Flagstaff," Gordon Holiday, Rural Development Community Development Specialist said. "If we're both in the field, our customers don't have to hit a closed door."

"In addition, 90 percent of our customers are Native Americans. In the office we have at least four Native speakers," Holiday said. "Being able to bridge that language gap—rather than a sign on the door or an English phone message, help us keep our customers happy."

Workers at the Flagstaff, Arizona USDA Service Center spend their days concentrating on the work of their agencies. Being in a Service Center, however, has helped them expand their information base, tempered parochial attitudes about the agencies, and created a larger family of co-workers.